

# Greek cities founded by barbarians?

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The cities of classical Greece told many stories to explain their origins and their foundations. The Athenians, for example, were proud to claim that they were indigenous to Attica, literally ‘born out of the earth’ that they lived on. The Spartans, in contrast, traced their origins back to one of Hercules’ sons who had to reconquer his ancestral homeland of the Peloponnese from interlopers. But what did it mean to descend from barbarians? Naoise Mac Sweeney looks at a selection of foundation myths to help us probe this question further.

Stories of origins and foundations helped the Greek cities to explain their interactions with each other; crucially, they were a handy way of using the heroic and mythic past to configure relationships in the present. It will serve us well to start by looking at two examples – the Ionian League and Athens – which reveal, in different ways, how foundation myths created both opportunities and potential difficulties for the Greek cities that used them.

## League of legends

Starting with the Ionian League in Asia Minor, the twelve original cities that comprised the League claimed to have a shared origin. The story goes that these cities were all originally founded by migrants from Athens, who were led by a son of the mythical king of Athens Codrus. This common foundation myth was a way to explain and justify the exclusive nature of the Ionian League, an alliance from which other cities in the region were debarred.

The myth also created a connection between the Ionian cities and Athens, with Athens claiming to be the ‘mother-city’ (literally: *metropolis*) of the Ionian League. This mythic opportunity was exploited by politicians and civic leaders during the fifth century from both sides. Athens used the myth to justify expanding the Delian League into Ionia, demanding loyalty and tribute from its ‘daughter-cities’ in Asia Minor. The Ionian cities were also quick to refer to their kinship with Athens when it suited them – for example, when they needed to petition Athens for military aid against their

enemies. For all the cities involved, shared origins came with advantages and disadvantages.

## ‘Born from the earth’

Foundation myths also helped to shape civic identities, and contributed to the way that a community thought about itself. In the case of Athens, the idea of the Athenians as ‘autochthonous’ or ‘earth-born’ contributed greatly to the Athenian mindset. When Thucydides wrote the famous Funeral Speech of Pericles, he put these stirring words into Pericles’ mouth:

*‘I will begin first with our ancestors... Always living on the same land, through their virtue they passed freedom down to those that followed them.’ (Thucydides 2.36).*

Their autochthony – the fact they had always lived on the same land – was sometimes a reason why the Athenians believed themselves superior to the inhabitants of other Greek cities.

In Euripides’ play *Erechtheus*, for example, a legendary queen of the city announces to the audience:

*‘I could find no city better than this: in the first place, its people do not come from elsewhere, but we are autochthonous. Other cities are founded as if by moves in a board game, some hauled in from one place and others from another: whoever dwells in a city not his own is like a square peg in a round hole, a citizen in name only’ (Euripides, Erechtheus fr. 360).*

At the same time as it contributed to their

unique status, however, the Athenian claim to autochthony was problematic for the Athenians in the context of their relationships with other Greeks – if they alone were ‘born from the earth’ of Attica, then they were not truly Hellenes, as were the rest of the Greeks, who claimed descent from Hellen, the son of Deucalion and Pyrrha.

## Foreign founding heroes

Now that we have seen some of the ways in which foundation myths could be exploited, or the complications they might pose, in the rest of this article, let us turn to a set of foundation stories that posed particular problems during the classical and early Hellenistic period – myths where the founding hero of a city was said to be non-Greek. There are several notable examples of this.

Thebes was supposedly founded by Cadmus, a Phoenician prince who – legend had it – left Phoenicia to search for his sister Europa, after she had been abducted by Zeus (disguised as a bull). On his journeys he was told by the Delphic oracle to stop his search, and instead to follow a cow and to found a city wherever that cow collapsed from exhaustion. The resulting city was ‘seven-gated’ Thebes; hence, the Thebans were often referred to as ‘Cadmeans’.

Another notable example was Danaus, the founder of Argos, who led his fifty daughters from Egypt to avoid the unwanted attentions of their uncle’s fifty sons. Danaus and his daughters eventually settled at Argos, where he founded the city there. Like the Thebans, the Argives were sometimes referred to by the name of their founder, perhaps most famously appearing as the ‘Danaans’ in the *Iliad*.

The problem did not lie in the fact that cities such as Thebes and Argos had foreign founders – a founding hero that originally hailed from elsewhere was common, as in the case of the Ionian founder who came from Athenian origins. What is particular about these cases was that the founding heroes in question were obviously non-Greek – Cadmus was Phoenician and Danaus was Egyptian. This may not have caused much in the way

of conceptual difficulties in the archaic period, when many in the Greek world embraced cultural interaction with the Near East. It did, however, seem to raise some questions from the mid fifth century onwards in the wake of the Persian Wars (490–480 B.C.), in an atmosphere where there were more cultural chauvinism and greater wariness of all things ‘barbarian’.

### Greeks and barbarians

It is now often thought that the very concept of the ‘barbarian’ – a category used to encompass all places and peoples that were not explicitly Hellenic – may have crystallized around this time; that is, as a result of the particular political pressures arising from the conflicts with Persia. For the experience of war had stimulated a sense of Greeks in opposition to the rest of the world. This was especially encouraged by Athens, which used anti-barbarian and pan-Hellenic rhetoric in order to promote unity and coherence in the Delian League – an association of Greek city-states whose purpose was to gain recompense for the destruction Greece had suffered following the second Persian invasion of Greece.

In this context, the figure of the barbarian founding hero would have become even more politicized. What did it mean for cities such as Argos and Thebes to originate from non-Greeks? What impact did it have on the way that other Greek cities viewed them? And did it serve to make them any less ‘Greek’?

### Thebes – the ‘City of Cadmus’

As we saw earlier, Cadmus’ search for his lost sister had resulted in the foundation of Thebes, whose Phoenician origin certainly seems to have played into the way the city was presented to the Athenians. Thus, when the great Athenian dramatist Aeschylus produced his tragedy, the *Seven Against Thebes* in 467 B.C., he made full use of the mythic traditions surrounding Thebes.

Originally one of a trilogy that dealt with the house of Oedipus (the others of which have been lost), the plot focuses on the period after the abdication of Oedipus, and the internecine struggle between his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, for the throne. Throughout the play, Aeschylus refers to Thebes as the ‘city of Cadmus’, and to Thebans as ‘Cadmeans’. Although the name ‘Thebes’ was already in use by this time (it appears in the poems of Hesiod, for example), Aeschylus chooses to use this archaizing terminology. At one level, these terms serve to create distance in time between the contemporary fifth-century audience and the mythical action set in the heroic past. But using these terms also creates a sense of a cultural

divide between the Athenian audience and the Theban myth. It subtly suggests that the Thebans were not properly Greeks, and points back to their Near Eastern origins.

There was indeed good reason why the Athenians might have chosen to dwell on Cadmus’ Eastern identity at precisely this time. Just over a decade before this in 480 B.C., the Persian king Xerxes invaded mainland Greece, and a number of Thebans had gone over to the Persian side. Indeed, these Thebans even fought fiercely in the Persian army against the Hellenic alliance and Athens. As Herodotus tells us:

*‘those Thebans who were on the Persian side had great enthusiasm in battle’ (Herodotus 9.67).*

The Athenians did not easily forget the Thebans’ support for Persia, and conspicuously omitted the Thebans from victory monuments and lists of Greek allies. We know that Aeschylus was himself interested in the Persian Wars (indeed, he is reported to have played an active role in them himself). He also wrote a play called *The Persians*, which dealt with the tragic consequences for Persia of defeat at the hands of the Greeks. Aeschylus’ choice of language in this Theban play is therefore significant – it suggests a deliberate distancing of Thebes and its people, but casting them in a subtly ‘barbarian’ light.

### Descended from barbarians?

Interestingly, Aeschylus also wrote a trilogy of tragedies about Argos, the only surviving play of which is *Suppliant Women*. The suppliants in question are the daughters of Danaus, and their supplication is for sanctuary at Argos. Perhaps relevant is the fact that Argos, although it had not actively supported the Persians, had either remained neutral or (worse) displayed some signs of pro-Persian sentiment. For Herodotus’ Athenian audience at least, this political stance in the present could be explained with reference to the distant past – Herodotus tells us that Xerxes appealed to the Argives for their support on the basis of kinship through the Danaids (Herodotus 7.150).

We will probably never know whether, when it came to making political decisions in the fifth century, the Thebans or the Argives were much affected by the idea of their founding heroes being non-Greek. What we do know, however, was in the decades that followed, authors writing in Athens forged a link between the ‘barbarian’ nature of these mythical founding heroes and ‘barbarian-friendly’ actions in the recent past. Despite Athens’ own ambiguous claim to Hellenic origins, it nonetheless remembered the origins of others explicitly in these terms.

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### Want to read more?

For the emergence of Greek identity and concepts of the ‘barbarian’, a good place to start is Jonathan Hall’s *Hellenicity: between ethnicity and culture* (Chicago University Press, 2002); but also Kostas Vlassopoulos’ *Greeks and Barbarians* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). For the Athenian attitude to Thebes, see Bernd Steinbock’s *Social Memory in Athenian Public Discourse* (University of Michigan Press, 2013). For foundation myths and foreign founders, see Margaret Miller’s 2005 article, ‘Barbarian Lineage in Classical Greek Mythology and Art: Pelops, Danaos and Kadmos’ in Erich S. Gruen (ed.), *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity*, pp. 68–89. For treatments of ‘barbarians’ in Greek tragedy, see Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford University Press, 1989).